

THE LANGUAGE OF DICKENS¹

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I RECENTLY read a statement, which I do not believe, that nobody under forty now reads Dickens. I suspect that this is simply a rhetorical way of saying that Dickens is less popular than he used to be. I am not sure that even this opinion is a valid one. Its truth will depend a good deal upon whether one adds to the readers of Dickens the very large numbers of people who watch adaptations of his novels on television. The success of the public readings to which Dickens, against Forster's advice, devoted so much of his energy in his later life, shows that there is much in the novels that can appeal to an audience of listeners and viewers as well as to readers, and one cannot help feeling that Dickens would have been a tremendous success as what is nowadays called a television personality. The remarkable thing about the popularity of Dickens is that it has lasted as well as it has. Much of his appeal lies in his mastery of comic effects, and the appeal of humour is particularly evanescent. We have only to look through the work of other nineteenth-century humorists, as represented in the early volumes of *Punch*, to see how much more lasting the appeal of Dickens has been.

Not only are people still reading Dickens, but they show no diminution in their willingness to read about him. There has been no falling off in the quantity of books about Dickens and I think that there has been an improvement in quality. There are fewer books about the topography of Dickens, with such titles as *The Country and Church of the Cheeryble Brothers*² and *Bozland*,³ and this is surely a matter for satisfaction, but the novels themselves are receiving more critical attention. One aspect of the novels that is receiving increased attention is the language in

¹ A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

² By W. Hume Elliot, 1893, 406 pp.

³ By Percy Fitzgerald, 1895.

which they are written,¹ and this is a subject that offers much scope for further investigation.

The study of the language of any author serves two purposes. It can lead the way to a better understanding of the author's meaning and a fuller appreciation of his literary skill, and it can provide material for the study of the history of the language. The same examples will often serve both purposes, and such a study has the further advantage of showing how closely linked the two approaches can be.

Dickens made free use of dialect to distinguish between one character and another, but the dialects he uses are class rather than regional dialects. The dialect of which he makes the fullest use is that of London, but it is the class dialect of the London poor that forms the basis of the speech of many of his most successful characters, and their speech has few regional characteristics. Regional dialect is used from time to time as an element of local colour, as for example in the Yorkshire speech of John Browdie (*NN*), the Norfolk speech of Mr. Peggotty (*DC*), and the nondescript dialect of Stephen Blackpool (*HT*), but the first two of these are only minor characters and Stephen Blackpool's dialect, though strongly marked, does not carry complete conviction. If Coketown can be accepted as "a composite picture, but generally agreed to represent Manchester",² Stephen Blackpool's speech likewise seems to contain features from more than one regional dialect.

A problem that has to be faced by every writer who makes use of dialect vocabulary is that of making sure that the reader, who may have no knowledge of the dialect in question, understands the meaning of the dialect words. Some writers rely on the context to make the meaning clear, and this method is usually effective, provided that the number of new words is not very large. Scott, who was an editor of texts as well as a novelist, provided his novels with glossaries and occasionally made use of footnotes. Dickens makes use of a device that might easily become

¹ See, for example, Randolph Quirk, *Charles Dickens and Appropriate Language* (University of Durham, 1959) and "Some Observations on the Language of Dickens", *A Review of English Literature*, ii, no. 3 (July 1961), 19-28.

² Alex. J. Philip, *A Dickens Dictionary* (1909), p. 82.

wearisome if used to excess : he incorporates a gloss into the text, putting it into the mouth of the supposed narrator. Mr. Peggotty describes David and Em'ly as "like two young mavishes", and his description is followed by the comment, "I knew this meant, in our local dialect, like two young thrushes, and received it as a compliment" (*DC*, chap. 3). In the same chapter Mr. Peggotty addresses Mrs. Gummidge as "old Mawther", and this is followed by the comment, "(Mr. Peggotty meant old girl)". When Mr. Peggotty visits David at Salem House, he says, "I'm a reg'lar Dodman, I am". David then does his duty as glossator by adding "by which he meant snail, and this was an allusion to his being slow to go" (chap. 7). The same device is used occasionally in other novels : in *Dombey and Son* Captain Cuttle refers to his "slops" and there follows the comment, "by which the Captain meant his coat and waistcoat" (chap. 15).

Redundant personal pronouns are a feature of many regional dialects, and Mr. Peggotty provides a particularly good example. After producing "two prodigious lobsters, and an enormous crab, and a large canvas bag of shrimps", which he modestly describes as "a little relish with your wittles", he makes it clear that they have been boiled :

"The old Mawther biled 'em, she did. Mrs. Gummidge biled 'em. Yes," said Mr. Peggotty, slowly, who I thought appeared to stick to the subject on account of having having no other subject ready, "Mrs. Gummidge, I do assure you, she biled 'em." (Chap. 7).

The dialect of which Dickens makes the most frequent use is that spoken by the two Wellers and by a host of other characters. Most of them happen to live in London, but their dialect has few characteristics peculiar to Cockney or to any other regional dialect. It is the dialect of the average working man who has not had much schooling, and Ernest Weekley has shown¹ that some of its characteristics were, during the eighteenth century, features of fashionable speech which by the time of Dickens had ceased to be fashionable. The characters who speak this dialect vary in the extent to which they use it. Jo in *Bleak House* speaks an extreme variety of class dialect. The following is a typical example :

¹ Ernest Weekley, "Mrs. Gamp and the Queen's English" in *Adjectives and Other Words* (John Murray, 1930), pp. 138-61.

“ They’re wot’s left, Mr. Snagsby, out of a sov’ring as was give me by a lady in a wale as sed she was a servant and as come to my crossin one night and asked to be showd this ’ere ouse and the ouse wot him as you giv the writin to died at, and the berrin-ground wot he’s berrid in. She ses to me, she ses, ‘ are you the boy at the Inkwich?’ she ses. I ses, ‘ yes ’, I ses. She ses to me, she ses, ‘ can you show me all ’ them places?’ I ses, ‘ yes, I can ’, I ses. And she ses to me ‘ do it,’ and I dun it, and she giv me a sov’ring and hooked it. And I an’t had much of the sov’ring neither.” (Chap. 19).

This is made to seem more remote from Standard English than it really is by spellings such as “ wot ”, “ wos ”, “ sed ” and “ ses ”, but it reads convincingly. Such features of syntax as “ the ouse wot him as you giv the writin to died at ” and the frequent insertions of “ I ses ” and “ she ses ” can be paralleled in the sub-standard speech of today. Like most genuine dialect speakers, Jo does not realize that he is speaking a dialect, and when he is asked what he means by “ Fen larks ”, the best gloss that he can provide is “ Stow hooking it ”.

Such phrases as these reveal a fairly thorough knowledge of the vocabulary of the underworld on the part of the author and call for a similar knowledge in the reader. Dickens’s interest in this vocabulary is shown elsewhere in his works. The two Bow Street Runners Blathers and Duff, who are sent to investigate the burglary at Mrs. Maylie’s in *Oliver Twist*, speak a distinctive dialect, with a plentiful mixture of cant, the variety of slang which is used as a secret language by criminals and their associates. Cant is used at the very beginning of the chapter when Blathers says that Duff is “ in the gig, a-minding the prad ”. “ Prad,” from Dutch “ paard ”, is a cant word for a horse, commonly used in the nineteenth century but not before then. Later Duff uses “ crack ” as a term for a burglary and Blathers speaks of “ blunt ” in the sense “ money ”. Both words are common in nineteenth century thieves’ slang. Much is made of the necessity for translating the language of Blathers and Duff, sometimes when the need for translation is not apparent, suggesting that some of these cant terms have passed into more general use since the time of Dickens. They agree that the burglary was not committed by a yokel, whereupon the doctor, Mr. Losberne, thinks it necessary to say, “ And, translating the word yokel for the benefit of the ladies, I apprehend your meaning to be, that this attempt was not

made by a countryman?" A little later the doctor finds himself unable to translate :

"Well, master," said Blathers, . . . "This warn't a put-up thing."

"And what the devil's a put-up thing?" demanded the doctor impatiently.

"We call it a put-up robbery, ladies," said Blathers, turning to them, as if he pitied their ignorance, but had a contempt for the doctor's, "when the servants is in it." (Chap. 31).

Blathers and Duff refer to well-known criminals affectionately by their nicknames. They disagree on the question whether a particular job was done by the Family Pet or Conkey Chickweed, and Duff explains that Conkey means Nosey. This explanation arouses the contempt of Blathers: "Of course the lady knows that, don't she?"

The association of speech with social class at a somewhat higher level is illustrated in *Edwin Drood*, where the Dean and Mr. Crisparkle combine to give the Chief Verger, Mr. Tope, a lesson in English grammar :

"Mr. Jasper was that, Tope?"

"Yes, Mr. Dean."

"He has stayed late."

"Yes, Mr. Dean. I have stayed for him, your Reverence. He has been took a little poorly."

"Say 'taken', Tope—to the Dean," the younger rook interposes in a low tone with this touch of correction, as who should say: "You may offer bad grammar to the laity, or the humbler clergy, not to the Dean."

Mr. Tope, chief Verger and Showman, and accustomed to be high with excursion parties, declines with a silent loftiness to perceive that any suggestion has been offered to him.

"And when and how has Mr. Jasper been taken—for, as Mr. Crisparkle has remarked, it is better to say taken—taken—," repeats the Dean; "when and how has Mr. Jasper been Taken—"

"Taken, sir," Tope deferentially murmurs.

"Poorly, Tope?"

"Why, sir, Mr. Jasper was that breathed—"

"I wouldn't say 'That breathed,' Tope," Mr. Crisparkle interposes with the same touch as before. "Not English—to the Dean."

"Breathed to that extent," the Dean (not unflattered by this indirect homage) condescendingly remarks, "would be preferable". (Chap. 2).

All three speakers accept the view that levels of speech are to be recognized and that the prescriptive grammarian has the right to lay down what grammatical forms shall be used in addressing men of high social position. The use of "English" as a term of praise to describe what is correct has its parallels elsewhere in Dickens

and in the colloquial speech of today. Mr. Bucket, the police inspector in *Bleak House* is indignant when his orders are queried: "Up, I tell you! Up! Ain't it English? Up!" (chap. 57).

A feature of Victorian middle-class dialects was the fondness for euphemism. It is common in the language of Miss Mowcher and her clients. The variety of names for rouge that she mentions can be regarded as an example of secret slang :

"One Dowager, *she* calls it lip-salve. Another, *she* calls it gloves. Another, *she* calls it tucker-edging. Another, *she* calls it a fan. I call it whatever they call it." (DC, chap. 22).

When Miss Mowcher is quoting Charley Pyegrove's reply on being asked if he wants rouge, she substitutes a euphemism for the oath we may assume he used: "What the unmentionable to ears polite, do you think I want with rouge?" She is shy about mentioning garters ("Oh my stars and what's-their-names!") and elsewhere we find examples of the widespread Victorian reluctance to use the word *trousers*. In *Oliver Twist* the butler Giles is describing his actions on being disturbed by burglars :

"I tossed off the clothes," said Giles, throwing away the table-cloth, and looking very hard at the cook and housemaid, "got softly out of bed; drew on a pair of—"

"Ladies present, Mr. Giles," murmured the tinker.

"of —*shoes*, sir", said Giles, turning on him and laying great emphasis on the word. (Chap. 28).

Victorian prudishness is turned to good account by the resourceful Silas Wegg when asked by Mr. Boffin to explain the difference between *Rooshan* and *Roman* :

"The difference, sir"—There you place me in a difficulty, Mr. Boffin. Suffice it to observe, that the difference is best postponed to some other occasion when Mrs. Boffin does not honour us with her company. (OMF, Book I, chap. 5).

The class dialects used by Dickens are for the most part those of lower-class speakers, but he showed himself also able to reproduce the chief features of upper-class dialect. The friendly young member of the Barnacle family in *Little Dorrit* is a convincing example of one type of upper-class speaker with a limited vocabulary which is nevertheless adequate to indicate his shocked sense of outraged decencies. Mr. A. O. J. Cockshut says that in portraying this character "Dickens hits off perfectly that subtle note of informal formality of the English upper class at work

(‘ You mustn’t come here, saying you want to know, you know ’).¹ Elsewhere the same kind of language is caricatured in the speech of “ the simpering fellow with the weak legs ” in *David Copperfield*:

“ Oh, you know, deuce take it,” said this gentleman, looking round the board with an imbecile smile, “ we can’t forego Blood, you know. We must have Blood, you know. Some young fellows, you know, may be a little behind their station, perhaps, in point of education and behaviour, and may go a little wrong, you know, and get themselves and other people into a variety of fixes—and all that—but deuce take it, it’s delightful to reflect that they’ve got Blood in ’em.” (Chap. 25).

The chief characteristics of this kind of speech are its repetitiveness and the speaker’s fondness for meaningless expletives. The same chapter provides an example of one special variety of the speech of the hangers-on of the upper classes, who shroud their speech with mystery in the hope of creating a good effect. Henry Spiker and Gulpidge “ entered into a defensive alliance against us, the common enemy, and exchanged a mysterious dialogue across the table for our defeat and overthrow ”:

“ That affair of the first bond for four thousand five hundred pounds has not taken the course that was expected, Spiker,” said Mr. Gulpidge.

“ Do you mean the D. of A.’s ?” said Mr. Spiker.

“ The C. of B.’s !” said Mr. Gulpidge.

Mr. Spiker raised his eyebrows and looked much concerned.

“ When the question was referred to Lord—I needn’t name him,” said Mr. Gulpidge, checking himself—

“ I understand,” said Mr. Spiker, “ N.”

There is a very close parallel to this way of talking for effect in *Nicholas Nickleby*, when Pyke and Pluck have undertaken the easy assignment of impressing Mrs. Witterly:

“ Is there anybody,” demanded Mr. Pluck mysteriously, “ anybody you know, whom Mrs. Witterly’s profile reminds you of ?”

“ Reminds me of !” answered Pyke, “ Of course there is.”

“ Who do you mean ?” said Pluck, in the same mysterious manner. “ The D. of B. ?”

“ The C. of B.,” replied Pyke, with the faintest trace of a grin lingering in his countenance. “ The beautiful sister is the countess ; not the duchess.” (Chap. 28).

Two of Dickens’s upper-class characters have the habit of talking *de haut en bas* with that superficial courtesy that can be more offensive than direct rudeness. Mr. Tulkinghorn replies to

¹ A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Imagination of Charles Dickens* (Collins, 1961), p. 60.

Guppy's stipulation that a friend should be present during their discussion :

"The matter is not of that consequence that I need put you to the trouble of making any conditions, Mr. Guppy." (*BH*, chap. 39).

Mr. Dombey is particularly guilty of "the pride that apes humility". He replies to Major Bagstock's greeting "I have the honour of addressing Mr. Dombey, I believe?" by saying "I am the present unworthy representative of that name, Major" (*DS*, chap. 10). This may simply be the courtesy of the time, but elsewhere the author underlines the insincerity of Mr. Dombey's protestations :

". . . I beg you to believe, Mrs. Pipchin, that I am more than satisfied with your excellent system of management, and shall have the greatest pleasure in commending it whenever my poor commendation"—Mr. Dombey's loftiness when he affected to disparage his own importance, passed all bounds—"can be of any service." (Chap. 11).

One of the characteristics of upper-class speech is a tendency to drop lightly-stressed syllables, giving a clipped effect. The best example in Dickens is the debilitated cousin of Sir Leicester Dedlock, who

now observes from his couch, that—man told him ya'as'dy that Tulkinghorn had gone down t'that iron place t'give legal 'pinion 'bout something ; and that, contest being over t'day, 'twould be highly jawlly thing if Tulkinghorn should 'pear with news that Coodle man was floored. (*BH*, chap. 40).

Cutting across the distinction between upper-class and lower-class speech, we sometimes find occupational dialects. These can best be studied in Dickens in the speech of his lawyers, who illustrate the principle of variety in uniformity. There are strong resemblances between the language of Conversation Kenge and that of Vholes in *Bleak House*, but there are also differences. One characteristic that they share is prolixity. Kenge uses long and involved sentences, which he is not always able to finish. Three times in chapter 3 his speeches include the words "—the—a—", which contribute nothing to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur and which may be assumed to represent the noises made by a practised bore to prevent anyone else from interrupting while he thinks what to say next. He has the orator's trick of piling up a series of phrases each introduced by the same word or phrase : "every difficulty, every contingency, every masterly

fiction, every form of procedure known in that court " (chap. 3). He affects to be fastidious about his choice of words and introduces needless phrases like " shall I say ?" and " I would say ", as if to apologize for the words that he chooses. Both of these characteristics are illustrated in the following passage :

" Mr. Jamdyce . . . being aware of the—I would say, desolate—position of our young friend, offers to place her at a first-rate establishment ; where her education shall be completed, where her comfort shall be secured, where her reasonable wants shall be anticipated, where she shall be eminently qualified to discharge her duty in that station of life unto which it has pleased—shall I say Providence ?—to call her." (Chap. 3).

Kenge's prolixity is reserved for those on whom he wishes to make a good impression professionally ; in dismissing Miss Flite (chap. 3) he can be quite concise.

Vholes is introduced by a long preamble emphasizing his respectability and the high opinion that Kenge and others have of him. He achieves prolixity largely by repetition : " That is scarcely fair, sir, scarcely fair " (chap. 39) and " The question may branch off into what is doing, what is doing ?" (chap. 39) ; he shares this characteristic with Mr. Casby in *Little Dorrit*.

In spite of the highly respectable build-up that he has been given, it is clear that Vholes is particularly detested by the author, who describes him as having a " buttoned-up half-audible voice, as if there were an unclean spirit in him that will neither come out nor speak out " (chap. 39), and he is guilty of vulgarisms, such as his habit of addressing Richard Carstone as Mr. C., of which Kenge would never be guilty. The vulgarisms are even more pronounced in the speech of William Guppy. Neither Kenge nor Vholes makes any great parade of the technical language of the law. Guppy does so, but the language of the law is only one of the elements that go to make up his very complicated idiolect. Its chief characteristic is the mixture of levels of speech that arises from the speaker's pre-occupation with class distinctions joined with uncertainty about the kind of language that is appropriate to a particular occasion. His proposal of marriage to Esther Summerson (chap. 9) illustrates the mixture. The legal language is found in the proviso, with which the proposal begins and ends, that it is " without prejudice ", in the description of that proposal as " filing a declaration ", and in the assurance that,

although his salary had stood at the same figure for "a lengthened period", "a rise of five has since taken place, and a further rise of five is guaranteed at the expiration of a term not exceeding twelve months from the present date". After receiving an assurance that what he says will be treated as "in total confidence", Guppy is still reluctant to begin his proposal.

All this time Mr. Guppy was either planing his forehead with his handkerchief, or tightly rubbing the palm of his left hand with the palm of his right. "If you would excuse my taking another glass of wine, miss, I think it might assist me in getting on, without a continual choke that cannot fail to be mutually unpleasant."

Apart from the gestures, this opening shows a mixture of the genteel (the address "miss"), the literary ("assist", "cannot fail to be", "mutually"), and the colloquial ("getting on", "a continual choke"). When the proposal is not well received, literary influences become more strongly marked. "Cruel miss, hear but another word!" and "Thy image has ever since been fixed in my breast" are straight out of a circulating library novel. He concludes by referring to himself as "Mr. William Guppy", with the social climber's insistence on the use of titles. A similar jumble of many different levels of speech is to be found in Guppy's interview with Lady Dedlock (chap. 29).

Perhaps because it is so complicated, Guppy's idiolect has not become so generally known as the "special languages" of some other Dickensian characters, such as Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Gamp and Jingle.

The special language of Mr. Micawber is marked chiefly by its smoothly flowing circumlocutions. This characteristic is most noticeable in his letters, but the style of his letters sometimes seems to overflow into his conversation, with the result that he "talks like a book". Long sentences are more at home in the written than in the spoken language, and Mr. Micawber's spoken sentences often get out of hand, with the result that aposiopesis is frequent in his conversation. The usual indication that a sentence is proving too much for him is the phrase "in short". This phrase is sometimes as misleading as the "I will be brief" of Polonius, but usually it marks the transition from a circumlocutory style to one that is extremely direct and colloquial. The prolixity and Latinized vocabulary of the earlier part of the

sentence are emphasized by the brevity and directness of its conclusion. The two styles are illustrated on Mr. Micawber's first appearance in the book :

" My address," said Mr. Micawber, " is Windsor Terrace, City Road. I—in short," said Mr. Micawber, with the same genteel air, and in another burst of confidence—" I live there."

I made him a bow.

" Under the impression," said Mr. Micawber, " that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road—in short," said Mr. Micawber in another burst of confidence, " that you might lose yourself—I shall be happy to call this evening, and instal you in the knowledge of the nearest way." (*DC*, chap. 11).

Even without the warning " in short ", Mr. Micawber is capable of sudden and surprising colloquialism : " My advice is, never do tomorrow what you can do today. Procrastination is the thief of time. Collar him !" (*DC*, chap. 12).

Mrs. Micawber shares some of her husband's linguistic characteristics, including a tendency to talk like a book, or rather like the leading article of a provincial newspaper. A comic effect is achieved by the use of genteel clichés in a context that is not genteel : " My papa lived to bail Mr. Micawber several times, and then expired, regretted by a numerous circle " (*DC*, chap. 12). The same fondness for the genteel makes her quote Latin, after a fashion : " experientia does it—as papa used to say " (chap. 11). Mrs. Micawber's mistake would be more readily appreciated by Dickens's contemporaries, familiar with the " unreformed " pronunciation of " docet ", than it is by the reader of today.

The highly individual language of Mrs. Gamp includes many features of sub-standard speech that were in general use, together with others that are individual eccentricities. To the first class belong such features of pronunciation as " sech " beside " sich ", " obserwation ", " afore ", " widder ", " chimley-piece ", " nater ", " nothink ", " arterwards ", " raly ' really ' ", such features of accident as " you know'd ", " he an't ", " to have wrote ", " you earns ", " which has undertook ", and such features of syntax as " them two young ladies ", " which it was but a young person " and " don't ask me to take none ". She shows an almost Elizabethan readiness to use one part of speech for another, as when she says " whether I sick or monthlies " (chap. 25). The most distinctive

feature of her pronunciation is her fondness for the affricate that is usually spelt "dg", "j" or "g". This sound is substituted for a wide variety of sounds, as in "Piljian's Projiss", "deniged", "individgle", "indisposed", "disposed".

Mr. A. O. J. Cockshut¹ has called attention to the strongly marked religious element in Mrs. Gamp's language, as illustrated by such phrases as "When Gamp was summoned to his long home" (*MC*, chap. 19). As a rule Mrs. Gamp's biblical allusions are more complicated than this straightforward quotation from the Book of Ecclesiastes. She spends most of her time in a half-drunken haze which effects striking transformations of familiar biblical passages. Biblical images of lambs and worms become merged in "But the words she spoke of Mrs. Harris, lambs could not forgive . . . nor worms forget" (chap. 49). Such transformations are not confined to biblical texts. Mrs. Gamp is not alone among Dickensian characters in saying things which are strictly nonsense but which have a logic of their own, as for example the insertion of "and will please themselves" in :

"Some people . . . may be Rooshans, and others may be Prooshans; they are born so, and will please themselves. Them which is of other naturs thinks different." (Chap. 19).

Alfred Jingle's jerky speech is so distinctive that when he reappears as Charles Fitz-Marshall (*PP*, chap. 15), it is enough to inform the reader, as well as Mr. Pickwick, who he is. Its chief characteristic is its disjointedness, caused by the omission of the "empty words" that indicate the relations between the ideas expressed by the nouns. The disjointed effect is increased by the punctuation, which consists mainly of hyphens. A speech of Jingle's can often be converted into something very near to conventional narrative by replacing some of the hyphens by commas or other punctuation marks and the rest by short connecting words or phrases :

"Ah! you should keep dogs—fine animals—sagacious creatures—dog of my own once—Pointer—surprising instinct—out shooting one day—entering enclosure—whistled—dog stopped—whistled again—Ponto—no go; stock still—called him—Ponto, Ponto—wouldn't move—dog transfixed—staring at a board—looked up, saw an inscription—'Gamekeeper has orders to shoot all dogs found in

¹ *Op. cit.* pp. 19f.

this enclosure '—wouldn't pass it—wonderful dog—valuable dog that—very." (PP, chap. 2).

Some of Jingle's shorter speeches are rather like the rough notes which some authors prepare with the intention of expanding them into narrative or dialogue. Dickens himself used such notes ; part of the number plan for chapter 5 of *David Copperfield* reads : " Waiter—glass of ale—chops—pudding himself ".¹ Professor James Sutherland² has called attention to a precursor of Mr. Jingle in *Goldfinch*, a character in Thomas Holcroft's play *The Road to Ruin* (1792). The closeness of the resemblance in style may be shown by quoting *Goldfinch*'s account of an accident which has befallen him :

" Bye road—back of Islington—came to a short turn and a narrow lane—up flew a damned dancing-master's umbrella—bounce!—off they went—road repairing—wheelbarrow in the way—crash!—out flew I—whiz!—fire flashed—lay stunned—got up—looked foolish—shafts broke—Snarler and Blackguard both down—Black-and-all-black paying away, pannels smashed, traces cut, Snarler lamed." ³

Jingle, like *Goldfinch*, upon occasion makes plentiful use of slang : " smart chap that cabman—handled his fives well ; but if I'd been your friend in the green jemmy—damn me—punch his head,—'cod I would,—pig's whisper—pieman too,—no gammon." (Chap. 2).

Sometimes Dickens's " special languages " seem to be introduced for their own sake rather than to give individuality to a character. His love of light-hearted and exuberant parody is illustrated by the introduction of the two Literary Ladies into one of the American scenes of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (chap. 34). Their names are Toppit and Codger, but it is doubtful whether many readers of the novel remember their names ; they are thought of as the two literary ladies who seek to persuade the mother of the modern Gracchi to introduce them to Elijah Pogram on the grounds that they are " Transcendental ". They make no contribution whatever to the plot and are clearly introduced because Dickens wanted to parody a particular way of writing. Each of them makes a short speech and they are then heard of no more :

¹ Quoted by John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (Methuen, 1957), p. 121.

² *The Oxford Book of English Talk*, edited by James Sutherland (Oxford, 1953), p. 451.

³ *The Road to Ruin*, III, i, quoted from Sutherland, op. cit. p. 273.

“ To be presented to a Pogram,” said Miss Codger, “ by a Hominy, indeed, a thrilling moment is it in its impressiveness on what we call our feelings. But why we call them so, or why impressed they are, or if there really is, oh gasping one ! a Pogram or a Hominy, or an active principle to which we give those titles, is a topic, Spirit searching, light abandoned, much too vast to enter on, at this unlooked-for crisis.”

“ Mind and matter,” said the lady in the wig, “ glide swift into the vortex of immensity. Howls the sublime, and softly sleeps the calm Ideal, in the whispering chambers of Imagination. To hear it, sweet it is. But then, outlaughs the stern philosopher, and saith to the Grotesque, ‘ What ho ! arrest for me that Agency. Go, bring it here ! ’ And so the vision fadeth.” (Chap. 34).

Dickens is no doubt here taking his revenge for the boredom he had suffered during his visit to America. In a letter to Forster, dated 3 April 1842, he mentions a general who had called on him in Washington with two literary ladies. He describes the general as “ perhaps *the* most horrible bore in this country ” and declares “ The LL’s have carried away all my cheerfulness ”.¹ But it is probable that the very distinctive manner of speech of the literary ladies also had a literary source. At the time of Dickens’s visit to America Transcendentalism was a popular theme for parodists, and the official periodical of the movement, *The Dial*, contains many passages, intended quite seriously, which illustrate the kind of writing which Dickens was no doubt trying to burlesque. The following is a typical example :

The soul lies buried in a ruined city, struggling to be free, and calling for aid. The worldly trafficker in life’s caravan hears its cries, and says, it is a prisoned maniac. But one true man stops, and with painful toil lifts aside the crumbling fragments ; till at last, he finds beneath the choking mass a mangled form of exceeding beauty. Dazzling is the light to eyes long blind ; weak are the limbs long prisoned ; faint is the breath long pent. But oh ! that mantling blush, that liquid eye, that elastic spring of renovated strength. The deliverer is folded to the breast of an angel.²

One of the simplest linguistic devices that can be used as an aid to characterization is the catch-phrase, and it is a device of which Dickens was very fond. When we think of Mr. Dick, most of us at once think of King Charles’s head. Similarly we remember that Barkis is willing, that Mrs. Micawber never will desert Mr. Micawber and that Wemmick is fond of

¹ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (Oxford edition), pp. 244, 248.

² *The Dial* ii, no. 1 (July 1841), p. 49. I am indebted to Dr. Dennis Welland for this quotation and to him and Professor Marcus Cunliffe for much valuable information about Transcendentalism.

portable property. We have become very familiar with the trick of catch-phrases in the mouths of innumerable music-hall and variety artists. It is possible to take an unsympathetic view of these catch-phrases and to say that their use rests on the assumption that a commonplace idea becomes funny if it is repeated often enough. It may be, however, that part of the secret of Dickens's success is that he makes things easy for his readers by his constant repetitions, and his catch-phrases are remembered by readers who are not used to reading with close attention. Such repetition gives pleasure to unsophisticated readers and audiences because it reminds them of other amusing contexts in which the catch-phrase has been used. This is no doubt the reason why the mere mention of certain place-names, such as Wigan or Aberdeen, is enough to bring broad smiles to the faces of an audience. There is an element of self-congratulation in the satisfaction with which a reader recognizes a catch-phrase or an allusion to one, especially if the allusion is indirect. For example, Vholes in his interview with Richard Carstone assures him, with apparent irrelevance: "I never impute motives; I both have, and am, a father, and I never impute motives" (*BH*, chap. 39). The relevance becomes clear when we remember that Vholes has made frequent reference to his three daughters and his father in the Vale of Taunton, mentioning his care for them as evidence of the disinterested rectitude of which his refusal to impute motives is but another example.

Some characters have distinctive linguistic characteristics which are more subtle than catch-phrases but which serve the same purpose of individualizing the character in a way that is easy to recognize. In *Dombey and Son* Susan Nipper makes frequent use of a sentence-pattern in two parts, introduced by "may" and "but" respectively. Examples are:

"I may wish, you see, to take a voyage to Chaney, Mrs. Richards, but I mayn't know how to leave the London Docks." (Chap. 3).

"A person may tell a person to dive off a bridge head foremost into five-and-forty feet of water, Mrs. Richards, but a person may be very far from diving." (Chap. 5).

"I may not have my objections to a young man's keeping company with me, and when he puts the question, may say 'yes,' but that's not saying 'would you be so kind as like me?'" (Chap. 12).

The mistakes made by foreigners in the use of English have frequently been used with comic effect by novelists and playwrights. Dickens was more aware than most novelists that the absurdities are not all on one side, but in *The Pickwick Papers* he follows the conventional line in making fun of Count Smorltork's attempts to speak English (chap. 15). The Count experiences the difficulties that English pronunciation commonly presents to foreigners: "th" and "w" represent unfamiliar sounds and consequently "things" becomes "tings" and "Pickwick" becomes "Pig Vig"; confusion between voiced and voiceless consonants adds to this difficulty in pronouncing "Pickwick", thus producing "Big Vig" beside "Pig Vig"; lightly stressed syllables are not always heard, with the result that "very" becomes "ver" and "politics" becomes "poltics"; one unfamiliar word is easily confused with another, and "comprises" becomes "surprises" and "expiring frog" becomes "perspiring fog". The degrees of formality appropriate to social occasions are very difficult for foreigners to master, and when the Count thinks that he has mastered the name of Mr. Pickwick, to whom he has just been introduced ("Peek—christian name; Weeks—surname; good, ver good"), we have the sudden burst of informality: "How you do, Weeks?"

Already as early as *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens began to make fun of the insularity shown by Englishmen when confronted by a foreign language. Mr. Lillyvick's reason for thinking French a dismal language because he had heard it used by prisoners-of-war is in the tradition of farce, as is his reason for continuing to think meanly of that language:

"What's the water in French, sir?"

"L'eau," replied Nicholas.

"Ah!" said Mr. Lillyvick, shaking his head mournfully, "I thought as much. Lo, eh? I don't think anything of that language—nothing at all." (Chap. 16).

The insular attitude to foreigners and their language is satirized more fully in *Little Dorrit* in the description of the difficulties experienced by John Baptist Cavaletto in Bleeding Heart Yard:

they began to think that although he could never hope to be an Englishman, still it would be hard to visit that affliction on his head. . . . They spoke to him in very loud voices as if he were stone deaf. They constructed sentences, by way of teaching him the language in its purity, such as were addressed by the savages to

Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe. Mrs. Plornish was particularly ingenious in this art; and attained so much celebrity by saying "Me ope you leg well soon," that it was considered in the Yard but a very short remove indeed from speaking Italian. (*LD*, Book I, chap. 25).

The same attitude towards foreigners and their attempts to speak English is shown in *Our Mutual Friend*. Mr. Podsnap is a less sympathetic character than Mrs. Plornish, but his attitude to his guest, the "foreign gentlemen," is very similar to hers:

There was a droll disposition, not only on the part of Mr. Podsnap, but of everybody else, to treat him as if he were a child who was hard of hearing.

As a delicate concession to this unfortunately-born foreigner, Mr. Podsnap, in receiving him, had presented his wife as Madame Podsnap; also his daughter as Mademoiselle Podsnap, with some inclination to add *ma fille*, in which bold venture, however, he checked himself. (*OMF*, Book I, chap. 11).

In the conversation between Mr. Podsnap and the foreign gentleman, the latter's defective pronunciation of English is indicated, but this is balanced by the "youngish sallowish gentleman in spectacles, with a lumpy forehead" who "caused a profound sensation by saying, in a raised voice, 'Esker', and then stopping dead", and the real object of satire is Mr. Podsnap's patronizing correction of the foreign gentleman's mistakes:

"... No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country."

"And ozer countries?"—the foreign gentleman was beginning, when Mr Podsnap put him right again.

"We do not say Ozer; we say Other: the letters are 'T' and 'H'; you say Tay and Aish, You Know;" (still with clemency). "The sound is 'th'—'th!'"

"And other countries," said the foreign gentleman. "They do how?"

"They do, Sir," returned Mr. Podsnap, gravely shaking his head; "they do—I am sorry to be obliged to say it—as they do."

In calling attention to some aspects of the language of Dickens I have confined my attention to the language used by the characters in the novels without making any attempt to analyse the author's own style which he employs in narrative and descriptive passages. I have made no attempt to treat the subject exhaustively and I am sure that any reader of Dickens could produce further examples to illustrate the points that I have made. If my comments have little value, I am not without hope that what I have said will be of interest to lovers of Dickens, since I have heard it said that a genuine Dickensian will read anything written about Dickens if only for the sake of the quotations.